Interview - Chris Brown

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Chris Brown is a prominent international political theorist who contributes to debates on issues of global justice, human rights, and humanitarian intervention. If you have ever taken a class in international politics and theory, then you are likely familiar with his books *International Relations in Political Thought: Texts from the Greeks to the First World War* co-authored with Terry Nardin and N. J. Rengger, and *Understanding International Relations*, written with Kirsten Ainley. Other recent books include *Practical Judgement in International Political Theory* and *Sovereignty, Rights and Justice.* He is Professor of International Relations at the London School of Economics and contributes to LSE's British Politics and Policy blog.

Professor Brown answers reader questions about the theory-practice divide, non-Western political theory, the ongoing crisis in Syria, and challenges to the Responsibility to Protect doctrine (R2P).

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Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in contemporary IR?

I think there are lots of areas where things are happening. One of the things that has interested me the most has been the of revival of realism in recent years, both classical realism, but also the work of Bernard Williams (eg*In the Beginning was the Deed,* 2009) and Raymond Geuss (eg *Philosophy and Real Politics*, 2008) the 'new political realism', as it's sometimes called. The idea is that too much contemporary IPT [International Political Theory] is essentially liberal moralizing, arguing that politics are secondary to morals, whereas what Williams was arguing, and Geuss argues, is for the autonomy of the political. So I think that's an interesting agenda.

The 'practice agenda' is also very interesting. But there are also a lot of things going on in IPE [International Political Economy], and global environment studies, which I don't know enough about, but think if I did know enough about them they would be extremely interesting.

What are the most important/interesting areas of IR theory that are underdeveloped today or under studied at the moment? Where is there most need and scope for new thinking?

I think partly the answer I already gave is relevant. People think they understood realism and its implications, and now they're realizing that maybe they don't. It seems strange to think of realism as an underdeveloped area, but I think in some respects it is. The serious thinking about this is a more recent phenomenon than one might expect. But the same is true of the 'practice turn'.

There's another area that I think is underdeveloped, although I get in trouble for saying this, and that's the whole area of foreign policy analysis. It seems to me policy analysis is very important. I think theory and practice have got divorced in ways that are undesirable. And to some extent, the analysis of foreign policy is part of that. Another aspect of this is covered in a piece I'm writing for the European Journal of International Relations; one of the arguments I make in that article is that there is a need for *critical* problem solving. You are probably familiar with the distinction between problem solving theory and critical theory, that's found in Robert Cox– he set this out 30 or so years ago- and he argued that critical theory challenges the roots and the way questions are set up. Problem solving

is just what it sounds like, it's solving problems that other people have given to you. What I want to argue is that we need more problem solving theory, but we need problem solving theory that's critical in another sense, that is oriented towards the less advantaged in society globally. So generally, one of the things I try to argue in the paper for the EJIR is that figures like John Ikenberry, John Mearsheimer and Joseph Nye are actually problem solving-oriented academics, and they do very good work, but their concept of the problem is very much, 'how do we manage power from the point of view of the powerful.' What I'm saying is, I'd like to see more work done on problems, but not the problems the powerful have, the problems that the weak have.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I think the biggest shift that has taken place in my thinking over the past 30 years is that I'm a lot less tolerant of relativist ideas, and multiculturalist ideas than I used to be. And that's something that when you say it, it induces shock and horror sometimes. 25 years ago, I was writing material that, if it wasn't poststructuralist, was at least 'fellow traveling' with the poststructuralists, arguing essentially anti-foundationalist ideas, arguing that the Western liberal tradition was just one tradition among other traditions, and so on. In a way, I think I was in bad faith over a lot of that. I believed that liberalism would always be there, and so one can afford to attack it. The events of the last 20 years have shown that that's really not the case, that a lot of the traditional liberal values of freedom and tolerance are seriously under attack and need to be defended. So I've become a defender of the Enlightenment project in a way that I wasn't maybe 30 years ago- that's a big shift. I'm not sure that any one particular individual has been significant in the process though- lots of individuals have been.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of IR?

If one's thinking in terms of an academic career, make sure that you know what you're letting yourself in for. I think an academic career has become much more difficult than it used to be, that the demands on young scholars are much more than they were. So you have to be *really* committed. Whenever students come to me and say they want to do a PhD I try to discourage them, I tell them- look, it's awful, the money is bad, you're going to have four years and you'll be miserable for most of it-don't do it unless you're *really* committed to a particular topic. The thing that's got to drive you is that you've go to be absolutely fascinated. Don't drift into it. Make sure that that's what the driver is, because that's the thing that will carry you through. And I think that's true for any area of scholarship nowadays.

How do you understand non-Western political theories in relation to IR theory?

I think this is a fascinating question. At a personal level, I wish I understood more non-Western theories. Some of the work that's done on non-Western theories seems to me to not be terribly good- I mean, one finds that some quite traditional Western ideas are being fed back from non-Western societies, so it's a kind of mirror effect- it looks as if it's coming out of China, but it's actually coming out of the United States, being mirrored back to the United States. On the other hand- and I'm using China as an example- there are a lot of very serious scholars working on classical Chinese political thought and its implications for the developing state system. It's a tricky task because Chinese thought is based around the idea of harmony and all under heaven being under one rule, and so there isn't really a great deal of material as I understand it on international systems, the idea of divided sovereignty, or indeed the ideas of sovereignty at all- it looks like a Western import. So I'm waiting- I do read a lot of the Chinese scholars, not in Chinese unfortunately, but many of them are translated to English. So far, I'm not finding stuff there that looks enormously original, but I'm still looking and I think it has got to be out there. There are other traditions as well- India I think is fascinating. India did have international systems for long periods, there ought to be authors out there with something to say. The only author that anyone ever talks about in the West is Kautilya, a classical Indian thinker. There have got to be others, and his thinking has got to be more sophisticated than we used to think it was. So I'm happily enthusiastic about the idea of non-Western IR theory, but I'm waiting for it, waiting for the books that present an alternative.

One thing that one can't get around, and I don't think that one is being imperialist in saying this, is that the current world order was created out of the European world order. So there's a sense in which the dominance of

European/North American thinking about International Relations isn't *simply* a product of power- it may be a product of power, but at first remove, if you see what I mean. The Europeans created the current world, as a result of which their ideas are the ones that are most obviously available for understanding how this world works. But this could change. The only really important non-Western idea in International Relations I think of the past 50 years came out of Latin America, and that was the Dependency argument of Gunder Frank and similar figures. The problem is that it was wrong, so you have a non-Western vision of the world that didn't hold up. So we're still waiting.

In a lecture given to the British International Studies Association in 2005, you suggested that in the past 3 decades or so, IR theory in the UK has become more professionalized and sophisticated even as it has become less connected to the rest of the IR discourse. Is that still the case, and if so, is it a concern? How should theory and empirical studies meet?

Smashing question. Yes, I think it's so. That's the first bit- I don't think anything has seriously changed. I've been reading material by some of the Americans on this, particularly Mearsheimer and Walt, and Ken Waltz thought the same thing. They argue that in America, theory is undervalued, and what is valued is empirical research, large-n quantitative studies- Political Science with a capital s: scientific technology, theory testing, that sort of quantitative work. In Britain I think it's exactly reversed- that kind of quantitative work is being done, and it's being done more than it used to be, but it's still a minority practice. Within the British scene, theory is more highly valued than it is within the United States, and in a way, there's been a kind of division of intellectual labor- economists could explain this in terms of theories of comparative advantage- British political theory has a comparative advantage over a lot of American theory, I think, whereas American applied research has a big comparative advantage over British. British graduate education is much less oriented towards quantitative techniques, the money is not there for large-N quantitative studies a lot of the time. So there's been a kind of divide between the two countries, and I think the British profession is more theory-oriented, and within the British profession it is theory that has more prestige probably than other areas: if you're working simply in empirical work it is somewhat more difficult to get the recognition that theorists get. So yes, I think that has happened, and it is continuing. And I don't think it's a good thing- we need more work on the theory-practice join. I think we need more theoretically-informed empirical work, much more. And a different kind of theoretically-informed empirical work. It gets back to my point about critical problem solving as opposed to just problem solving.

Do you have any suggestions for how the theory-practice divide might be bridged?

You know, I just said that it hasn't changed, but it may be changing, I think there might be more people interested in this- the practice turn in theory has pushed people back more into empirics. And I think the kind of divide that Mearsheimer and Walt talk about is not as serious here. In the States it really is- we're all remembering Ken Waltz at this moment of course because of his recent death- I was at the conference at Aberystwyth for the 30th anniversary of *Theory of International Politics*, and I remember him and John Mearsheimer talking about the complete absence of new theoretical thinking. Mearsheimer, who is a very significant figure at the University of Chicago, said that he couldn't appoint good theorists- it wasn't just his kind of theory that was missing, there just weren't that many people doing formal theory either. PhD students in the United States are encouraged to do large-n quantitative studies. That's how you get a doctorate: you pick your little hypothesis and test it, you don't go from the big theoretical picture. I don't think it's quite as bad in this country, there are still theory PhDs being turned out- I've supervised some very good ones in recent years, and so have other people in my department. So I think that maybe it will change over time but I think that we've got a different problem in Britain than in America. Of course I say that, but it's really a united discipline because of the intersections between the two, so it's difficult to talk about them as being separate now.

Are the recent conflicts and interventions in the Middle East and West Africa raising new questions and challenges for theorists of humanitarian intervention – or are they confirming existing thinking?

R2P is an interest of mine, and I think the message from Libya has been very instructive on what the limits of R2P actually are. So I think we're learning something from that. Syria is teaching us what we should know anyway, which is that caution is always required, and that we have to be very careful what we're doing. But I think as you say- you mention four cases there, Libya, Syria, Ivory Coast, and Mali- one of the striking things is how different they all are.

Generalizing on humanitarian intervention can be very difficult to do. The Libyan case and the Syrian case look as though they have certain similarities, because they both come out of the Arab spring, but they're very, very different. Assad's place within Syrian society is very different from Gaddafi's within Libyan society. In a way, what these cases illustrate is the point I was making earlier about theory and practice: we need to approach these problems from the basis of knowledge about the individual countries; big-picture knowledge about humanitarian intervention doesn't actually help much if you're deciding what to do about Syria. What you want to know about Syria is, who is supporting Assad, who is opposing Assad, what is the geopolitical balance, what would happen if we did X- these are empirical questions, they're not big stories about humanitarian intervention.

What kinds of things should states look at when they are deciding whether or not to intervene in cases like Syria?

The most basic thing is don't make things worse. The key is, can we act in these circumstances in ways where we're pretty confident that our intervention will improve the situation on the ground for the people who live in the area. I think on the whole it did for Libya, even given all of the problems there. The Gaddafi regime was threatening mass murder in Benghazi, and one of the things that was unusual about Gaddafi was that he did threaten his own population in this way. Governments quite often harm their populations, but they very rarely announce their intention to do so quite so vigorously. It's difficult to ignore when someone's saying, 'we're coming in and killing all the rats and cockroaches,' in circumstances where you can do something. So I think you just have to find out what the situation is on the ground- can you actually improve things by intervening, or will you actually just heighten or make the war worse. And do you have a sense of what kind of outcome you'd like to see, and whether you'll be able to produce it. That, I think, has become the problem in Syria. Conceivably, if support had been given very early on to the Free Syrian Army, that might've been a good thing to do, but now we've got to a point where the Syrian opposition seem to be composed of groups we don't necessarily want to support, and we don't want to support Assad either. So there's a sense in which trying to broker a deal is probably the best thing we can do. I think Obama's got it right on this. He's keeping out of it and attempting to work with the Russians on some kind of solution, and I think that's the right way to go.

You have argued that humanitarian "interventions involve the exercise of power." In a situation like the on-going crisis in Syria, what kinds of power and interest calculations will states like the US, Russia, and Turkey make?

As to the first point, this is one of the things that is so obvious that people forget it at times, that intervention is always an act of power. Powerful countries intervene in weak countries, it's never the other way around. Because that is so obvious, people put it on one side in a box and they don't think about it. But if you exercise superior power in that way, then you have to be very careful that you're not engaging in bullying- you have to be very careful that you're sure of your case before you get involved.

What are the considerations? Well I think the considerations are: is it in the national interest, what are our national interests in these circumstances. One of our interests ought to be- what are the interests of the people in the country concerned, so I think it's reasonable enough that the world is very concerned about the fate of the Syrian people. But you've also got to think about your own position on that. You've got to look at the balance of forces within the country; how your action, if you did act, would be received; what the implications would be; and what kind of actions would be needed. That is one of the features of the Syrian case that is different from the Libyan case: in the Libyan case, the Libyan air force was pretty much a joke. Producing a no fly zone took about an hour, it was one night's work with cruise missiles to take out their anti-aircraft capability. It's not like that in Syria: Syria has a very effective anti-aircraft capability, they've got a lot of mobile missiles, they've got a lot of modern fighter jets. Basically they have been preparing for a potential war with Israel for a long time so they've got a lot of very good kit there. That doesn't mean you couldn't do it, but it wouldn't be easy, and that has to enter into the calculations. A medium-term campaign to establish air superiority could be a very damaging process, a lot of people would get killed, a lot of civilians. And it would be very difficult to do this without Turkey, but if Turkey gets involved, then that threatens to really become a major regional conflict, to pull in Iraq, Iran, other countries in the region- Israel is a possibility as well. So I think these are the kind of considerations that have to be taken on board. It would be nice to sit down and say, what is the best

thing we could do for the Syrian people, but one has to think about all these other factors, partly because they will affect the Syrian people as much as they affect other countries. I mean, if this turns into an even worse war than it is at the moment then even more Syrians will be killed than have been already.

Given the lessons that states and international organizations are presumably learning from recent interventions and crises, what kinds of lessons do you think will be drawn for the development of R2P?

I find that R2P is in a confusing state at the moment, because on the one hand, the language of the Responsibility to Protect has been mainstreamed into the UN system: it's now the way that the UN talks about these issues, it's the way that the Secretary General talks about them. So it has been adopted in that way. At the same time, the underlying problems with R2P haven't been solved. Ultimately R2P tries to depoliticize the act of intervention, and that depoliticization has failed. There isn't a consensus on the Security Council on these issues, Russia and China think about these things very differently than the way the Western powers think about them, and even amongst themselves, Britain and France think about these things somewhat differently than the United States does. The developing world on the whole, the global South, hasn't accepted the R2P premise, they haven't accepted that this is something different from humanitarian intervention. The language has driven out other ways of talking about intervention, but the politics of it is still really not established. So I think we're just going to have to watch and learn, as it were, as other crises come up. Gradually the language and the practice will come together, either by R2P being changed quite dramatically, or by peoples' attitudes being changed. At the moment I think it's still very much in flux. Immediately after the Libyan intervention, people were saying that R2P has now come of age. But I think the Syrian case shows that that simply isn't true, and the subsequent problems in Libya forced people to reassess whether this was really a great success in the first place. Now people think that it might have been a success but it's really 60/40, whereas it looked much more clear cut originally. So I think the jury's still out on R2P, and will be for some time.

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This interview was conducted by Alex Stark. Alex is Features Editor and a director of e-IR's editorial board. She is currently studying for an MSc International Relations (Research) at the London School of Economics.